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ABSTRACT

A team consisting of a school psychologist, a social worker, and two school counselors developed a program in Newton, Massachusetts to deal with children's problems resulting from their parents' separations and divorces. School staff was surveyed and interest was reported in the following areas of separation and divorce issues: (1) knowing more about the emotional and academic effects on the student in school; (2) getting ideas to use in working with students; (3) understanding when to make appropriate referrals to psychological services staff; and (4) knowing laws and regulations governing child custody. The program included community involvement and in-school programming. In the community involvement segment a conference was held for social agencies and school personnel, a meeting was conducted with a single parent group and school personnel, the movie "Divorce Comes to School" was promoted, and a resource brochure for school personnel and parents was developed. In the in-school programming segment a staff survey was conducted, a teacher curriculum was developed, in-service staff workshops were developed, and follow-up was conducted with faculty and staff. (ABL)

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THE SOCIAL WORKER'S ROLE IN MOBILIZING A SCHOOL SYSTEM TO ADDRESS THE ISSUES OF DIVORCE AND SEPARATION

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Social Workers, 3rd, New Orleans, LA, January 31-February 3, 1985.

ABSTRACT

Newton Massachusetts has a school population of 10,898 children currently served in 17 elementary schools, three junior high schools and two senior high schools. The separation and divorce rate is felt to reflect the current statistics, from thirty to fifty percent depending on individual schools. These issues are brought to the classrooom daily along with the pain, bewilderment and anxiety felt by the children involved. To address these concerns and devise ways to address them appropriately a system-wide effort was begun four years ago.

A committee made up of school psychologist, social worker, junior and senior high school counsellors and a third grade teacher met regularly and developed a four phase program:

A. Community Involvement

1. Conference for Social Agencies and School Personnel
   Co-sponsors: Family Service Agency, Office for Children, Area Mental Health Office
2. Meeting with single parent group by School Personnel
3. Cooperative effort with local cable TV station to produce film, Divorce Comes To School
4. Development of resource brochure for school personnel, parents and agency use.

B. In-School Programming

1. Staff survey to determine:
   a. How issue perceived
   b. What efforts had already been undertaken
   c. What kind of help they could use
2. Development of teacher curriculum through summer workshop
3. Development of in-service staff workshops involving:
   a. presentations by counselor, psychologist, social worker and classroom teacher
   b. resource materials including curriculum
   c. film: Divorce Comes To School
   d. group discussion
4. Follow-up and feedback through formal and informal system channels
   a. principal and teachers
   b. psychological/social work staff
   c. facilitating individual school request for in-service faculty workshops

The concrete phase of this effort will be pursued for the 84-85 school year concentrating on the further refinement of the curriculum materials that were developed and following through in the effort to have each elementary school mount their own workshop involving their school-based psychologist and social worker. Also planning for the junior and senior high school needs which have to be addressed in a different manner. Resource materials will also be available along with film Divorce Comes To School which can be shown whole (29 min.) or segments.

MOBILIZING A SCHOOL SYSTEM TO ADDRESS ISSUES OF DIVORCE AND CHANGING PATTERNS OF FAMILY LIVING

Rohna A. Shoul, LICSW
Newton, Massachusetts,
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We all know that families are in flux; and because of this so is the relationship between the school and the children's caretakers.

The statistics are well-known. Perhaps the more compelling one I recently encountered is the projection that nearly half the children born in 1980 will live in single-parent families before they turn eighteen. What these numbers mean to the schools who educate the children, whether public or private, is that a whole range of emotional and practical needs are part of the baggage that youngsters bring with them to class each day- along with their lunch boxes, homework, signed notes, milk money etc. Much of the latter are often forgotten but not the feelings, worry, anxiety that accompany separation, divorce and remarriage- events that keep their lives in an unsettled state. The school is very often the one stable factor that they can rely on. Particularly on the elementary level, whether they wish to or not, the classroom teacher, principal, secretary and even custodian are often drawn into the lives of children and their families when uncertainty prevails.

Teachers are continuely having to adjust their own value system to new forms of family arrangements: conferencing with separated parents together, who may be hostile to each other, or having to hold separate meetings, having the stepparent along with the biological parent in various configurations, Lesbian mothers or Gay fathers with their respective lovers who are very upfront about their relationships. It can often mean double telephoning if one parent is not in good communication with their ex-spouse and feels the other parent should hear directly from the teacher. It means two notices now being sent out to make sure both parents are kept informed about school activities.

The literature is abundant about the issue. Individual

teachers and support personnel have developed various responses to help children in the school setting. Often this happenstance depending on the individual sensitivities and available time.

The Newton Public Schools(Massachusetts) have attempted to address these issues through a system-wide committee that has functioned for over four years.

Newton is a community of 84,000 people, affluent but with pockets of poverty, both ethnically and religiously mixed. It is very close to downtown Boston and has had a program for black inner-city children(METCO) since 1965. From a peak student enrollment in the mid 1960's of over 18,000 we now have 10,411 enrolled in seventeen elementary, three junior high and two senior high schools. This population includes 415 METCO students and 333 ESL students who come from twenty-six different countries and speak 17 different languages.

Six elementary and two junior high schools have been closed within the past five years and now under consideration is the closing of two more elementary schools and one more junior high school.

Loss of jobs has been a pervading concern especially since the passage of proposition 2½ in 1981. This limits the power of the municipality to tax property owners. The budgetary independence of the school committee has also been taken away with recent legislation which gives the Mayor the power to decrease the overall amount requested by the school committee.

Newton has also enjoyed a reputation for many years as a leader in educational excellence. Until fairly recently the autonomy of of individual schools was considered an important attribute. Gradually the vertical integration of curriculum is prevailing and there is more control from the central office. Administrators still step gingerly and use their authority carefully. The staff is predominately a mature one but there is an effort to hire young creative teachers. They are the first to be let go when school consolidation occurs. Presently a new superintendent is gradually reshaping the central administrative staff. Change brings some apprehension and this is reflected at all levels with the classroom teacher feeling the burden of heightened expectations from principals, curriculum coordinators and parents. Basic skill tests, special education requirements and

challenging programs for gifted children(to counter the drift to private schools) are taking an ever increasing amount of the classroom teachers time. This at a time of diminishing resources, slightly larger classes and larger numbers of children who bring to school all the social issues that exist within their families.

The support services are impressive when one looks at the various specialists that have mushroomed over the past thirteen years when the State(1972) and then the Federal Government(1975) mandated equal access to education for all children(i.e. reading specialists, learning disability teachers, language therapists). A psychologist is available two days and a social worker one day per week per school(on the elementary level). But as the diagnostic abilities sharpen and awareness increased so do referrals and the available support service time becomes inadequate. These services have also experienced cutbacks and the diagnostic needs preempt therapeutic or preventive services.

Against this background the system-wide Divorce and Separation Committee has struggled to find a way that would provide support for the classroom teacher who has to deal with these personal issues simply because they are there; and to somehow bring about some uniformity of effort rather than chance event.

It would be nice to start this narrative of how the committee was formed by saying the awareness of this issue prompted the central staff to gather a representative group to brainstorm and come up with a plan. In actuality an irate divorced father who happened to be an elected official did not receive notice of his child's high school graduation(because notices only went to the custodial parent) and came storming up to the school department. Several educational events were planned after that to explore this process of family dissolution from several perspectives(legal, psychological and educational). A volunteer committee was formed with representation heavily weighted from the Guidance/Social Work/Psychology staffs. Eventually a third grade divorced teacher became an integral part of the group.

We had not yet been hit four years ago with the effects of proposition 2½ and there was some staff time available to organize a community conference in conjunction with the Family Service Agency and the Office for Children with some small seed money made available

from the area Mental Health Board. This first undertaking was to bring together various agencies and school personnel to explore the issue and come up with some recommendations. Parent and children support groups, more flexibility with school schedules to accomodate working parent schedules, more daycare were among the recommendattions. Another community conference was also recommended where parents and children would be able to come together with professionals from the schools and social agencies to see how these institutions could better respond to their needs.

Unfortunately this never happened. The people who ran the first conference were unable to commit the kind of time necessary to put another one together and noone was able to take their place. Proposition 2½ took it's toll by rechanneling the energies of administrators who were supportive but who had to deal with the nitty gritty of budget cuts and all it's ramifications. School personnel did meet with a local single parents group to listen to their needs. This group(SPIN-Single Parents In Newton) was established in 1977 and maintained a very active program of information and mutual support. It ceased operation in 1981 finding it difficult to attract new leadership.

The Divorce and Separation Committee continued to meet however with representation from elementary, junior and senior high schools. After meeting with our consulting psychiatrist we decided to survey the entire staff as to how they perceived the issue, what they were already doing about it and what kind of help they could use. The Social Work Staff undertook the collection of questionaires in their individual schools.

Out of a staff of 1800(classroom teachers and support services) there were 426 replies. About 90% of those replying said that staff training on issues of changing families, separation and divorce could be useful. The following were reported(in order of preference): 1. knowing more about the emotional and academic effects on the student in school, 2. getting ideas to use in working with students, 3. understanding when to make appropriate referrals to psychological services staff, 4. knowing laws and regulations governing child custody.

What also emerged were the wide range of efforts by individual teachers, counsellors, psychologists and social workers, through their own initiative, to help children and their parents.

Children discussion groups were the main thrust with a few parent groups as well.

From the above information the committee went on to discuss in-service programs to be offered on a voluntary basis to schools who requested it. Since this was the spring of 1982 reality prevailed and plans were postponed until the fall of 1982. A summer workshop was organized (with funding from the school system) to develop a curriculum which would respond to the teachers' expressed needs and also give committee members an opportunity to sharpen their own skills as workshop presentors.

The workshop produced the materials and the fall of 1982 found the committee grappling with the most effective way to disseminate them. Through all of this Dr. John Cullinane, Director of Pupil Personnel was the cohesive force, taking the responsibility for calling meeting, sending out committee notes and generally keeping up the momentum.

Because of needs and organizational structure the elementary schools became the focus and Dr. Cullinane met with the executive committee of the Elementary Principals Group to describe the materials and elicit their suggestions. Though there was agreement about the importance and implication of the issue there was strong hesitation to impose yet more training or curriculum workshops on teachers. The principals suggested the social workers act as the resource in the schools they serve, that volunteer workshops be offered through the Teacher Center or through regular in-service channels.

Meetings then took place with the Social Work and Psychology Staffs along with the showing of an excellent film,Divorce Comes To School, made in the Newton Schools by a local journalist for local Cable TV outlet. Four members of the committee who were directly involved with groups of children at the elementary and secondary level were participants. It is beautifully done and is a tribute to Terry Holzman and the sensitive rapport she established with the children and their families. The production and showing of the film heightened the commitment of the committee and provided a focus for the workshop format.

The psychologist and social worker in each elementary school agreed to take the lead, under the guidance of the principal,

to develop a faculty meeting presentation in the spring or fall of 1983 on the topic of Separation and Divorce. Outside of one elementary school it did not happen. One complicating factor was technical. The film mentioned above, which became a key pin in the presentation, was on videotape and could not be shown in the elementary schools because the equipment had not been purchased due to budget cuts.

Given this reality a decision was made to hold a workshop in each junior high school inviting representatives from each feeder elementary school. The junior high schools had the necessary equipment. Again as the 83-84 school year began and the escallating pressure of work increased the social workers involved in the planning made the decision to hold one workshop in a junior high school for all the elementary schools. Hopefully this will provide a nucleus of committed staff in each building who the psychological/social work staff can then work with in providing ongoing support for children and their families, concrete resources and whatever else seems appropriate.

In retrospect this overview is evidence of what a very small committee, with appropriate support, can do to have some impact on a moderately large suburban school system, where change comes slowly.

Beyond the events mentioned above a new student emergency card is now in place, system-wide. This requires schools to have on file the name and address of both parents(if there are separate addresses). A resource list has been developed and kept up to date in a handy brochure form that can be given to parents, professionals or the general public. Also the committee cooperated with the local Cable TV Public Affairs Program on Divorce and were available in four different schools on different nights for anyone in the community, the week after the program was aired. All this has been done without any extra funding and with meetings taking place during school time. The administrative support continues as does the commitment of a group of people whose energies are stretched but whose caring remains constant.

Addendum

The role of the Social Worker in the Newton Public School's Divorce and Separation Committee is an example of the influence that can be exerted by the School Social Worker in a non-resistant system. The original committee was open to anyone. Those that joined and stuck with it ran the show. Here was an opportunity to address a pervasive issue in a system-wide manner, rather than the typical clinical model.

The importance of social work practice in schools as a connecting link with the community became evident at the very beginning of the committee's formation. Becasue one School Social Worker always served on an inter-agency committee it was possible to take the initiative and suggest a community conference for professionals; knowing that the concerns raised by various agencies about divorce and separation issues prevalent in their caseloads were shared by school personnel who saw the results in the classroom.

The structure of the commitee itself was influenced by the social worker who recognized early on the need for a teacher to augment the perspectives of the Mental Health Professionals. An excellent elementary teacher(who was divorced) was persuaded to join and her principal was persuaded to provide classroom coverage to make this possible. Her point of view was most important in the development of the curriculum for classroom use and in the teacher workshop.

Because Social Workers have a good understanding of community resources a subsequent role was the publishing of RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND KIDS, a simple but handy brochure to give to school personnel, community agencies, parents etc. When the curriculum workshop was formed it was a Social Worker who collected the basic reference materials that the participants used, who helped develop the system-wide questionaire and did the detail work in organizing the workshops.

OVER

The Newton experience was triggered by an event but any risk-taking School Social Worker could replicate the various components. We know the impact of family upheaval on school children. We have a responsibility to seize the initiative and bring our professional skills to bear in an area crying for attention.

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